

The Humanities Are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!

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The humanities have everything to do with the human condition, understanding human nature and human problems.

—NEH *Overview* Fact Sheet

The academic disciplines and values of the humanities in western cultures run from the Greek trivium—grammar, logic, rhetoric—to modern-day studies in history, philosophy, religious studies, literature, languages, art history, and some interdisciplinary studies. What is their future, and what is their relationship to honors education? Are the humanities dying or dead?

Performing a Google search for “Humanities Are Dead” yields a number of arguments on both sides, from a 2010 article series in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with subsequent blogposts to opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and *Huffington Post*. There is even a high-school senior’s award-winning play of that title performed at the Dobama Theatre in Cleveland this summer in my neck of the woods. My favorite is an online andytown post of June 24, 2013:

Here's an idea: let's put a one year moratorium on any "death of the humanities" articles, either by outsiders or insiders. I want every academic or employee of a university out there to agree not to participate in this seemingly weekly emerging body of texts. I want senior academics to stop telling people that they would never do what they did if they had to do it now. I want newspapers to stop printing them as a way of fueling a flame with questionable statistics and highly generalized hypotheses based on personal experience. And I want the headlines of these articles to be less provocative and more honest; let's stay away from "The Decline and Fall of the English Major." After a year, instead of coming to quick judgments, we'll talk about what we've learned.

Now that this one-year moratorium has expired, of course, I can write this essay and use this title.

OBITUARY: THE LAMENT

Comics on television routinely tell jokes about the epitome of a useless education, namely a major in comparative literature (my field)—substitute English or philosophy. Universities are touting the professional majors and the pragmatic value of a college education. Liberal arts colleges are adding master's programs in professional fields in order to stay afloat. STEM projects, and the dollars to support them, abound. For two decades the glut of PhDs in English in a poor job market has caused some academics to warn that graduating so many is immoral. Higher education is more and more run as a big business, and boards of trustees hiring a president or even a provost look to the CEO as a model. Administrative talk teems with terms such as, pardon the expression, "productivity," "stakeholders," "learning outcomes," and "data-driven decision-making." Meanwhile, public schools are "teaching to the test" more than they are developing critical thinking and creative imagination. Making teachers and administrators, their jobs on the line, responsible for student "success" has even encouraged cheating via changing test results.

Government research funding? The National Science Foundation reports an appropriation of *c.* \$7.2 billion while the National Endowment for the Humanities reports \$146 million, a ratio of nearly 50:1. The NEH funding is the lowest in constant dollars since 1971 (National Alliance for the Humanities), and the National Endowment for the Arts reports that its funding has also remained flat this year at about the same level as the NEH. For FY 2013,

NEH grant applicants requested \$480 million, and only about 30% of this amount could be granted (National Alliance for the Humanities). In contrast to NEH's flat budget again this year, the NSF reports that its appropriation rose by 4.2%, or \$287.8 million.

Outside academia the qualitative signs of humanities life are moribund. The fourth estate has proliferated into increasingly specialized magazine niches, and newspapers have lost readership and funding. Remaining print news sources have descended into "info-bits" and have dumbed down formerly thoughtful and well-researched journalistic essays to a form digestible by readers with a limited attention span. Television news programs suffer the same infection and either repeat the same lead stories and video footage endlessly or muck around in pop-culture trivia. Online blogs and opinion sites cater to the multi-tasking, thumb-numbing habits of smart-phone users.

Which leads us to social media. How did the pejorative term "computer virus" transmogrify into the celebratory "going viral"? YouTube has created instant pop stars before they have the maturity to handle fame. Texting has replaced talking. We used to worry that the compulsion to photograph one's experiences was replacing the ability to enjoy the experience in the present. Now "selfies" have carried the process one step further. Texting has created more opportunities for bullying and sexual exploitation.

Politics? Thanks to the Supreme Court, money dominates both elections and subsequent legislation. Policy decisions reflect ignorance of history. Party ideology reduces and oversimplifies, refusing to tolerate complexity and compromise. Important issues receive little reasoned debate (remember the importance of rhetoric in the trivium?). Sloganeering substitutes for thought.

The English language shudders before journalistic hyperbole, crude neologisms, textspeak (a crude neologism), and collective amnesia about the difference between "lie" and "lay." Libraries empty their shelves of books and bound periodicals as electronic resources and devices expand. Independent and even big-chain bookstores close shop, and publishing houses are pushed to the wall by the price negotiations of large-scale online distributors.

The litany (not of saints but of sinners) could continue through widening income inequality, racism, consumerist commodification, and reality shows' competition for disgust points. Are all of these the direct results of weakening humanities education? Well, plenty of other causes are available, but more and better humanities education might have prevented some of this decline.

SUCCESSION: A CELEBRATION

Good news! We humanists are still here. If nothing else, departments of philosophy, English, languages, and history continue to be vital to core liberal education requirements at most institutions. As service departments they still have the opportunity to snag eager students into their majors by inspiration. As a freshman civil engineering student I was thus captured by an exciting freshman-English teacher who opened new perspectives on literature. After committing to English over music, I swallowed the lure of a visiting scholar of comparative literature who fed my hunger for more new perspectives, my xenophilia, and my love of languages, so I prepared for a doctorate in that field. I found that the humanities gave scope to my rational, analytic bent as well as my imagination and empathy. In turn, my colleagues and I have continued to find and nurture such ambitions. Years after my department, with the help of an endowed chair, established a new pragmatic graduate specialty in literacy, rhetoric, and social practice, graduate-student applicants continue to favor literary study. I am not one of those academics who would not choose the same field a second time. I reaffirm my choice.

In the world beyond academia, the qualitative life-pulse flutters and quickens. Journalism and social media also claim some good news. Al-Jazeera America and BBC America News and the PBS News Hour counteract the partisan and sensationalist television news channels. More and more journalists possess the language skills to communicate directly with people in crisis around the world. Social media allow millions of new voices to be heard around the globe. They offer a welcome though often bewildering array of discussions about ideas, events, and public issues. They feed revolutions that depose dictators and generate news coverage through on-the-spot photos and video. They help raise money instantly for worthy causes such as the Boston One Fund following the marathon bombing. They allow parents of a child with a rare terminal disorder to find a life-saving bone-marrow donor halfway around the world.

More good news is that local historical societies are cropping up or expanding their interests and funding base. Book clubs are proliferating, places where human beings discuss real books (in some cases, admittedly, audiobooks). The independent American Booksellers Association reports an increase in membership for the fifth straight year. The English language is rejuvenated and refreshed by the fun of invention, as it always has been. The availability of electronic research materials explains why I could gather

the citations in this essay on my desktop, partially with the remote aid of my university library. Humanities departments are constantly enlivened by new theories, pedagogies, and connections to the world of experience outside the academy.

English, history, philosophy, and language majors are finding all sorts of interesting and useful employment in law, government work, environmental organizations, international business, fundraising, public relations, human resources, and management generally. As CEOs keep telling us, employees with excellent communication skills—including writing—and a good work ethic are in high demand.

Enlightened thinking about the human condition feeds everything from the spread of recycling and organic farming to the celebration of diverse cultures and new forms of architecture and water wells for the poor.

HONORS AND THE HUMANITIES: A FRUITFUL PARTNERSHIP

Honors education grew out of the liberal arts and sciences tradition, from Oxbridge and the Ivies into the 1920s at Swarthmore via its president Frank Aydelotte and thence, through his influence, into state universities in the 1930s. Honors programs continued to thrive under the aegis of colleges of arts and sciences, expanding significantly in the 1950s and developing into colleges of their own in the 1960s and beyond. From early on, student thesis work flourished in the sciences as well as the humanities, and later in the social sciences. Theses and honors courses in professional fields came much later, and coordinating such work continues to challenge honors administrators.

What is striking is how many early honors leaders came from the humanities. Aydelotte himself was an English professor. Of the forty-eight presidents of NCHC, thirty-three, or 69%, have come from the humanities. Of these, twenty came out of English departments, another four came from the closely related fields of comparative literature and languages, and six were historians. Some of the English faculty founded their honors programs—e.g., Dudley Wynn (University of New Mexico), John Portz (University of Maryland), and Ada Long (University of Alabama at Birmingham). Of the fourteen non-humanities presidents, eight were social scientists and one a music faculty member. Data about disciplinary fields of current honors administrators are not readily available, but, in a 1996 article in the *Journal of Higher Education* Gordon and Gary Shepherd reported on a 1991 survey of 173 honors administrators, the large majority of whom were NCHC members. The disciplinary breakdown of these directors was 79% humanities and social sciences (307).

Interestingly, this study, focusing on attitudes about war, found that honors faculty were more opposed to the Vietnam and Gulf wars and more likely to participate in protests than the random sampling of over six hundred other faculty (306). A specific breakdown for and within the humanities occurs in Ada Long's *A Handbook for Honors Administrators*. In her 1992 survey of NCHC-member honors administrators, 131 of the 136 respondents specified their academic disciplines. Sixty-seven, or 51%, came from traditional humanities, with English in the lead at twenty-nine and history second at fourteen. Another five came from arts or interdisciplinary studies (92).

Certainly honors administrators from all fields have served their programs and colleges admirably; my own college has been served well by deans from chemistry, geology, political science, and economics as well as English. Nevertheless, humanities faculty have been particularly drawn to honors work, suggesting a special connection. Honors education and the humanities share core values, including the importance of deep, sustained reading. Students of history, literature, and philosophy confront complex and demanding texts and develop sophisticated methods of analyzing these texts. A hallmark of honors education is that students experience primary materials of study, reading original texts in all sorts of fields. Both humanities and honors value not only high levels of reading skill but thoughtful responses to texts and an ability to integrate them into broader knowledge, reaching toward not just learning but wisdom. Such habits run counter to the mindless consumption of infobits.

Both honors and the humanities value questing and questioning minds and require time for reflection and synthesis. Students of humanities wrestle with universal problems of human experience, and we ask honors students to do the same. Lively in-class discussion and debate characterize the generally small classes in both humanities and honors. Probing issues outside class leads in both cases to essay writing. Testing in class demands thoughtful, synthesizing essay responses rather than multiple-choice check-offs and leads to the good writing that is needed more than ever in the workplace.

Both honors and the humanities nurture a tolerance for ambiguity and a recognition of complexity and context. Understanding global economics and politics requires seeing the big picture, including the historical background behind the current particular. Sorting out moral conflicts, including conflicts between two goods, calls for serious mental energy. Immersion in imaginative literature helps students grow large inside with participation in the boundless range of human characters and human experience. Small wonder that students

in both honors and the humanities are less satisfied by the shallow stream of entertainment media when they have dipped into the Pierian Spring.

Finally, I suspect that humanities faculty bring to honors programs an overweening intellectual ambition. English professors are notorious for dipping into other fields and thinking that their ken stretches over the whole intellectual domain. Expressed in a more kindly fashion, they (we, I) suffer from an endless appetite for exploration. They are less condemned to specialization than many of their colleagues in other fields. Delighting in the fact that they always have more books to read and more ideas to engage, they also seek to reach out to the social sciences, sciences, and even professional studies. Reared in the liberal arts and sciences, they wish to share their own sponge-like absorption of ever wider knowledge with bright students. Where better to do this than in an honors program? In other words, humanities faculty, admittedly less trammelled by large grants and labs to maintain than the scientists, seem temperamentally suited to honors work. Their emphasis on the qualitative rather than the quantitative has drawn many of them into the challenging and very human intellectual work of honors administration and pedagogy. Fortunately, the humanities have been, and continue to be, a generous gift to honors education.

With rich Victorian eloquence, Cardinal Newman defined what the humanities have to offer—and perhaps what honors education has to offer—as he defined the aims of a university education (albeit influenced by the cultural ideal of the English gentleman). A university education, he writes,

. . . aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in

any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in the way; he is a pleasant companion, and a comrade you can depend upon; he knows when to be serious and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect. He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad. He has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm. The art which tends to make a man all this, is in the object which it pursues as useful as the art of wealth or the art of health, though it is less susceptible of method, and less tangible, less certain, less complete in its result. (134–35)

Enough said.

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